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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF
ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER, MAY 27-30

REF: A. ASHGABAT 0363
[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 0219

[1](#)1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

[1](#)2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Embassy Ashgabat warmly welcomes your visit to Turkmenistan as an important opportunity to advance our bilateral dialogue in the areas of education and the human dimension. President Bush met briefly with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on April 3 at the NATO Summit in Bucharest. Other high-level U.S. meetings with him have been Senator Richard Lugar in January, Energy Secretary Bodman in November 2007, and Secretary Rice in September 2007 during the UNGA in New York. Coordinator for Eurasian Energy Diplomacy Ambassador Steven Mann meets with Berdimuhamedov regularly, most recently on February 28. Into the second year of his presidency, Berdimuhamedov is increasingly self-confident and will not hesitate to speak his mind. We believe his instincts are generally right, even if his understanding is elementary and his implementation timelines unrealistically quick. Turkmenistan will gradually bring its standards -- including educational and human rights -- in line with international levels. But he's starting from almost zero with very few on his team who have the experience and capacity to implement the reforms he says he wants. Like many ex-Soviet governments, Turkmenistan relies too heavily on presidential decrees and the power of law-on-paper. The longer-term monumental task will be to change a century of national political psychology, the entrenched bureaucracy, and the culture of rent-seeking. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Nearly sixteen months into the post-Niyazov era, Turkmenistan is becoming significantly different from the international bad-joke pariah state it was under the late President-for-Life. But precisely what Turkmenistan is becoming is still a work in progress. Evidence increasingly suggests it could well one day become a responsible partner for the United States and a normal international player. As detailed in both reftels, Berdimuhamedov's fundamental policies have been promising. However, he faces an uphill struggle against political traditions that favor autocratic governance models and a bureaucratic capacity stunted by 15 years of Niyazovian repression and solipcism. The challenge

will not be to get new reforms on the books -- Berdimuhamedov is already beginning to do this -- but rather, to change the attitudes and modi operandi of those officials responsible for implementing the new policies.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

14. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov has made a public commitment to bring Turkmenistan's laws and practices -- including in areas of human rights -- up to international standards. At his order, the country's legal, human rights and legislative bodies are working overtime to rewrite or draft more than 30 laws and codes, including on religion and civic organizations, family, and criminal and criminal procedures codes. The President on April 16 also ordered that the country's constitution -- revised four times since 1992 -- be redrafted in time for a September meeting of the Halk Maslahaty -- the massively large, rubber-stamp People's Council, which is responsible for approving constitutional changes. While USAID, UNDP, the OSCE Center and other foreign donors are seeking to offer as much advice as possible, the president's ambitious timeline for constitutional reform provides only minimal opportunity for international comment.

15. (SBU) In seeking to promote democratic development and strengthened respect for human rights, the embassy is working with the newly empowered Institute of Democracy and Human Rights, which is one of the government bodies most open to and cooperative with foreign donors. We believe that this body, which has a director who clearly enjoys the trust of

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the president, can play a significant role. In January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed to USAID's proposal for cooperation with the institute. Areas for cooperation include information exchange, the provision of legal and technical expertise, and support for increased access to information. The institute has fully embraced USAID as a valued partner. Together with the institute, USAID's partner, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, has laid out an ambitious plan for cooperation over the next year. Other USAID partners have made or are preparing to make proposals based on feedback from the institute.

16. (SBU) Although the president is making progress in overhauling Turkmenistan's laws, human rights practices continue to lag behind the president's intentions. RFE/RL reporters continue to experience considerable harassment from security forces, including efforts to disrupt the wedding of one reporter's son. Small evangelical Christian religious groups continue to experience problems with registration, and some unregistered groups have experienced harassment. We have heard reports that some individuals are continuing to experience troubles with traveling abroad, including the daughter of an RFE/RL reporter who we previously had been told would be allowed to go overseas. While the president last summer released Turkmenistan's former Grand Mufti, imprisoned since 2005 under charges of complicity in the 2002 attack against former President Niyazov's motorcade, only a handful of other individuals who were also imprisoned for alleged involvement in the attack have been released. Despite these problems, the number of new cases -- and of individuals coming to the embassy seeking assistance with perceived human rights complaints -- is down sharply from previous years.

MEDIA

17. (SBU) While most of Turkmenistan's media remains state-controlled, President Berdimuhamedov has emphasized the need for reform, calling for more creativity and more international and political news to better inform readers and viewers. Simultaneously, however, he has noted that a principal role for the media is to stimulate patriotism and support for reform efforts, and there is no official

discussion of allowing independent media to develop. Within this context, state media have shown gradually increasing openness, but still much uncertainty and a lack of capacity in attempting to fulfill the president's demands. In particular, the Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting has asked specifically for U.S. experts and assistance to further develop Turkmenistan's news media. This has led to unprecedented embassy access to and contact with state media, but also so far to only minimal improvements in newsgathering, editing and production techniques. Both broadcast and print media have started to cover a wider range of topics, but would not even think of challenging or criticizing government policies. These limits are a result of strict self-censorship -- no one wants to be the first to try an "unapproved" innovation. We believe there remains potential for coaxing Turkmenistan's media further along the road of providing more and better information. A next step in this regard could be continued and expanded partnerships with U.S. and other foreign media outlets.

EDUCATION

18. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov and his officials repeatedly emphasize that reforming the education sector has been one of their top priorities, and he has said to U.S. visitors the hardest task is to change the mentality of a people. Standard schooling has returned to the ten year-model of the Soviet era from Niyazov's nine-year standard. University education has returned to the previous standard of five years, instead of Niyazov's model of two years of study and two years of work. Many new university

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buildings have been constructed or are under construction. The country is opening "state of the art" grade schools and secondary schools. Recently the president announced that any new school construction project will only be considered completed when the building has full Internet access.

19. (SBU) And yet, to date, the president's (and government's) focus has been more on improving the shell than on reforming the core of the educational system. While there has been little emphasis placed up to now on retraining teachers or on modernizing the curricula, there have been some clear signs, during recent visits of delegations from both Texas A&M and Chadron State College (Nebraska), that the government recognizes the links between human capacity and curricula and may be considering curricula changes for institutes of higher education. In particular, the Minister of Education is eager to re-start a Texas A&M partnership that would reform Turkmenistan's sole business education program to American standards over the next 3-4 years (this project is being fine-tuned for review by the Government of Turkmenistan). At lower levels, though, the system -- including some hard-core hold-outs like the infamous Nury Bayramov, the Ministry of Education's International Relations head -- continues to constrain individual initiative and block suggestions for improvements and reforms from reaching the Minister. In particular, many return exchange participants are prevented or discouraged from returning to their places of work or study. Despite these problems, there have been some murmurs of interest in a Bolashak-like program in which the government would provide scholarships to Turkmen students to attend U.S. universities.

10. (SBU) Action on U.S.-sponsored educational programs is focused in USAID and the embassy's Public Diplomacy section. More than 100 Turkmenistan citizens are participating in 2008 in the embassy's FLEX (high-school), UGRAD (college-level), Turkmenistan AUCA Scholarship program (TASP), Teachers Excellence and Achievement (TEA), Muskie, Fulbright and Humphrey exchange programs. Through its Quality Learning Program, USAID is seeking to support efforts to improve teaching and student assessment methodologies, increase teachers' participation in curriculum and education policy development, and promote development of transparent and

efficient school finance and management systems. Most recently, USAID has proposed two new programs: 1) to assist Turkmenistan to take part in the upcoming Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), a rigorous study of student skills and knowledge in math and science that will help Turkmenistan to bring its education system in line with international best practice, and 2) in coordination with UNICEF, to improve secondary math, science and advanced literacy skills in UNICEF pilot schools. USAID discussed these proposals with Minister of Education Annaamanov May 15, and is working on a formal proposal for both projects.

TURKMENBASHY AMERICAN CORNER

¶11. (SBU) May 25 is the two-year anniversary of the closing of the Turkmenbashi American Corner. Although the government has agreed that its re-opening should be part of the year-long review of cooperation, there has been no progress in re-opening the Center. In urging action, you might stress that, without an American Corner, teachers, students and others in Balkan Province do not have the same access to educational advising that can assist them in applying to U.S. universities.

FOREIGN POLICY

¶12. (SBU) Despite his statements that he plans to continue the "neutrality" policies of his predecessor, Berdimuhamedov has put an unprecedented emphasis on foreign affairs to repair Turkmenistan's international and regional relations

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and to become a respected player on the international stage. Under the president's leadership, Turkmenistan has reached out to participate actively in regional organizations. He has met with all the leaders in the region, as well as with those of other countries of importance to Turkmenistan. China has a strong and growing commercial presence in Turkmenistan, and continues to court the president through a series of high-level commercial and political visits, including a July 2007 Berdimuhamedov trip to Beijing focused on natural gas and pipeline deals. Presidents Berdimuhamedov and Gul (Turkey) have exchanged visits, but bilateral relations continue to be colored more by the image of Turkey's lucrative trade and construction contracts that are eating up large amounts of money from the national budget. Berdimuhamedov has held positive meetings with high-level leaders of international organizations (including both the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and IFIs that have led to productive, cooperative relationships. The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Louise Arbour, visited Turkmenistan in May 2007, and the High Commissioner on Religion will visit in September.

¶13. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov has held positive meetings with high-level U.S. officials and is well-disposed toward the United States. He made his first trip to the United States as president to participate in the UNGA session in September 2007, where he also met with Secretary of State Rice. In November 2007, Secretary of Energy Bodman met with Berdimuhamedov in Ashgabat, and Berdimuhamedov's meeting with President Bush during the April Bucharest NATO summit received extensive and very positive media coverage in Turkmenistan. Berdimuhamedov made his first visit to EU and NATO headquarters in Brussels in November 2007.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

¶14. (SBU) Accompanying the president's focus on reaching out to Turkmenistan's near and more distant neighbors has been an increased effort to participate in and cooperate with regional fora. In part, this represents a recognition that Turkmenistan's interests in a number of areas -- including trade, energy, and combatting narcotics trafficking -- are not well-served by continuing President Niyazov's go-it-alone

approach. Over the last year, Turkmenistan has become an increasingly active player in a number of regional fora, including the (counter-narcotics) Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center, the Central Asian Trade Investment Framework Agreement mechanism (TIFA), and the European Union's Central Asian Troika process (Turkmenistan hosted the troika meeting and wanted to host TIFA). Cognizant of its neutral status, it has bolstered its previous participation in meetings of the Commonwealth of Independent States with participation -- but only as an observer -- in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and (in its status as a Partnership-for-Peace country) NATO. Turkmenistan is also participating in regional reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, sponsoring a number of Afghan students at its universities and pedagogical institutes, and agreeing in early April to bolster by 2010 the electricity it is already selling to Turkmenistan by an additional 300 Megawatts. The president also agreed to extend the current price at which Turkmenistan is selling electricity to Afghanistan -- 2 cents per kilowatt hour -- to 2010.

ECONOMY AND FINANCE

¶15. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov has stated repeatedly, in many fora, that he wants to develop an international-standard market economy and to promote foreign investment. To those ends, he has placed a new priority over the past eight months on promoting economic and financial reform. Turkmenistan has announced that it will redenominate its currency in 2009, dropping off three zeros, and has already unified the country's dual exchange rates. The president has stated that

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some state enterprises will be privatized -- though not in "strategic" sectors like oil and gas, electricity, textiles, construction, transportation, and communications. He has signed a new foreign investment law, which, among other things, guarantees resident foreign businessmen and their families one-year, multi-entry visas, and approved changes to the tax code. The president divided the overworked Ministry of Economy and Finance into two bodies -- a Ministry of Economy and Development, and a Ministry of Finance, and he has created a Supreme Auditing Chamber with the goal of providing transparency in the budget process. In a notable development, the president also announced that he will abolish the opaque extrabudgetary funds that were prone under his predecessor to misuse and corruption. Finally, the state has slowly begun to raise the price of electricity and price of vehicle fuel. These measures could be part of an early effort to gradually phase out the state's extensive and tremendously expensive subsidies system.

¶16. (SBU) Even though the president has reshaped his bureaucracy, put in place the structures that theoretically should help promote a market economy, and opened Turkmenistan to cooperation with IFIs, the lack of basic understanding and bureaucratic capacity remains an enormous impediment to change. New reforms are being rolled out with inadequate preparation, understanding of their consequences and explanation -- and are leading to increased public dissatisfaction. USAID is working through its contractor, BearingPoint, to implement a new program to increase bureaucratic capacity and to support growth of private business in Turkmenistan. Department of Treasury representatives will also visit Turkmenistan in June to identify areas where Treasury might play a role in promoting reform, should funding be available.

ENERGY

¶17. (SBU) Turkmenistan has world-class natural gas reserves, but Russia's near monopoly of its energy exports has left Turkmenistan receiving much less than the world price and overly beholden to Russia, although Gazprom has agreed to pay "world price" starting in 2009. Pipeline diversification, including both a pipeline to China proposed for 2009 and the

possibility of resurrecting plans for Trans-Caspian and Trans-Afghanistan pipelines that would avoid the Russian routes, and construction of high-voltage electricity lines to transport excess energy to Turkmenistan's neighbors, including Afghanistan, would not only enhance Turkmenistan's economic and political sovereignty, but also help fuel new levels of prosperity throughout the region. Berdimuhamedov has told U.S. interlocutors he recognizes the need for more options and has taken the first steps to this end, but he also took the steps needed to increase the volume of gas exports to Russia, signing an agreement (with Russia and Kazakhstan) in Moscow in December 2007 to enlarge and rebuild a non-functioning Soviet-era Caspian littoral pipeline. To date, little progress has been publicized on this project. He will require encouragement and assistance from the international community if he is to maintain a course of diversification in the face of ongoing Russian efforts to keep Turkmenistan from weaning itself away from Russia.

¶18. (SBU) One of the biggest challenges that Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon sector will have to face, if it is to succeed in pipeline diversification, is the need for increased natural-gas production. Turkmenistan produced a reported 72.3 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2007, a figure that barely meets its existing domestic needs and export commitments. The president directed that production should increase to 81.5 bcm in 2008. Even larger increases will be needed as/if new pipelines come online. While Turkmenistan has welcomed foreign companies to work its offshore (primarily oil) Caspian blocks, it has up to now largely rejected allowing foreign energy companies to work its onshore gas fields,

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maintaining that it can handle the drilling itself. But onshore natural gas production offers some tough challenges, including ultra-deep, high-pressure, high-sulphur, sub-salt drilling, which requires special skills and technologies and massive investment. One Western analyst suggested that costs could run as high as \$100 billion over the next five years. No one outside of the Turkmen government believes Turkmenistan has either the skills or the financial resources needed. U.S. policy has been to promote onshore production by major Western oil companies. We know there has been strong debate within the government about this, and we have watched views evolve. We believe, in the end, there will be major Western companies working onshore -- but we aren't there yet.

SECURITY

¶19. (SBU) The U.S. security relationship with Turkmenistan continues to unfold, with slow but consistent cooperation. Although basing is not an option, Turkmenistan remains an important conduit for the U.S. military to Afghanistan. Maintaining blanket overflight permission and the military refueling operation at Ashgabat Airport remains a key U.S. goal. CENTCOM and Turkmenistan's military maintain an active military-to-military cooperation plan, and CENTCOM and the Nevada National Guard (operating through the State Partnership Program and CENTCOM's military cooperation program) have a productive counter-narcotics program that has funded training and completion of two border-crossing stations on the Iranian and Afghan borders and the construction of three more checkpoints, including one currently underway on the Uzbekistan border. With the assistance of the Embassy's EXBS program, the Embassy works to strengthen Turkmenistan's border security and to increase its ability to interdict smuggling of weapons of mass destruction.

COUNTER-NARCOTICS COOPERATION

¶20. (SBU) Berdimuhamedov's efforts to distance himself gradually from Niyazov's "Golden Age," we-have-no-problems rhetoric have led him to acknowledge publicly that Turkmenistan has serious problems with narcotics trafficking

and addiction, primarily opiates from Afghanistan. In January 2008, he established and funded a new DEA-like State Counter-Narcotics Service that will be responsible for both interdiction and demand-reduction efforts, and he put in charge an activist official, Murat Islamov, that the international donor community both respects and trusts. While Islamov already has a headquarters building, he is literally building his new service from the ground up. During a meeting with embassy officers in April, he welcomed whatever training and equipment the United States can provide. With a promised infusion of \$20 million in CENTCOM counter-narcotics funds in FY 2009 and the possibility of a similar amount in 2010, the embassy country team is now discussing how the United States can most effectively respond to Islamov's request.

HOAGLAND